

Jim Litchfield, Outspoken Building Inspector

He can be heard hollering objections in the back of the auditorium at the Planning Board hearing. He has vociferously voiced his opinion at many a Zoning Board of Appeals meeting. He often tells Selectmen exactly what he thinks.

James Litchfield, Zoning Officer and Building Inspector, usually tells everybody just what he thinks.

As Building Inspector, Litchfield is in charge of the enforcement of the Mass. Building and local building codes. As Zoning Officer, he enforces the Town's zoning bylaws. This dichotomous position would be enough to send anybody screeching to a Dale Carnegie course, a suggestion made to Litchfield by Selectman Arthur Clark this year.

The position of Building Inspector in Cohasset began in June 1970 and was a half-time job until July, 1974 when it finally went to 35 hours a week. Litchfield took over in 1972 and each year finds it increasingly difficult to keep up with the job's demands.

"It's getting to the point you'd have to be a structural engineer or lawyer to interpret and enforce these codes," Litchfield laments.

Reviewing plans and specifications, approving and issuing building permits and inspecting all work under construction as well as public buildings and places of assembly may often necessitate telling people what they don't want to hear — that they are in violation. Litchfield, a crackerjack at knowing the law and who can or can't do what where, is often abrupt in manner but correct in his observations.

On a recent outing with Litchfield, The Mariner was exposed in brief with the trials he endures as a part of daily

work. Like a professional photographer, Litchfield looks at his environment with an attuned eye. What may pass by the layman unnoticed, Litchfield may pick up as a fire hazard, for instance.

The first stop that day was the Ripley Road Nursing Home, where Litchfield dropped off a Certificate of Inspection. He had made one of his periodic inspections examining required occupancy per floor. He had found conditions satisfactory and was routinely dropping off the OK. A simple case.



James Litchfield

Litchfield's next stop, his fourth inspection at a new dwelling being constructed off Forest Avenue, was more complex. The particular stage of the construction plastering was given the go ahead by Litchfield, as were the foundation, framing and chimney previously. Litchfield noted, however, that there had been a problem with the plumbing at one point where too much timber had been cut to allow pipes to pass through the walls thereby weakening them.

On the way down the driveway from the new home, Litchfield — this time as Zoning Officer — pointed to a place where the surrounding land wasn't draining properly. Until the waterlogged area was corrected, he said, he wouldn't issue a Certificate of Occupancy.

Litchfield explained that before construction could have begun on the property at all, a

building permit had to be issued. Not as simple as it sounds, he warned, as he enumerated the conditions that are required — an approved septic system permit, a plot plan showing the location of the septic system and the dwelling with adequate setback requirements, structural drawings showing side elevations, insulation, egress — the list could go on.

En route to his next stop, Litchfield still wearing his Zoning Officer's hat, pointed to a house with an adjacent horse barn. To this reporter, the home and yard depicted a pretty pastoral scene. To Litchfield it constituted a menace to the health of the neighborhood because the barn was within 100 feet of a brook — a situation which had to be pursued with the Board of Health and Conservation Commission.

Another metamorphosis and Litchfield became the Building Inspector again during the inspection of fire extinguishers at the Cohasset Golf Club. Most of the extinguishers were missing, probably because of theft, Litchfield said, and he left the manager with the warning and reminder to replace those missing by the time the golfing season began.

Driving back to his office, Litchfield detoured onto Rte. 3A. He'd received a complaint from a conservation-minded individual regarding the filling of wetlands by a business on the highway. Getting out of the car and looking at the area Litchfield remarked that the Conservation Commission should put up stakes outlining the area considered wetlands.

He explained that if the owner of the property wanted to persist in his activities he would have to receive approval from the Conservation Commission before applying for a special permit before the Zoning Board of Appeals.

Litchfield's duties increase daily. He's awaiting a new

building code from the state as well as the June Town Meeting decisions on town bylaw regulations. The constant changes often make it next to impossible to police and remember everything that has to be done.

Often residents will watchdog and report to him violations they pick up. Sign and off-street parking violations, Litchfield said, are two bylaw regulations which would never

be enforced if it weren't for the observations of the townspeople.

All of this doesn't leave Litchfield in a altogether popular position, for as mentioned, he can be the bearer of bad news reminding people of hazards and nuisances they forgot or didn't even know they had. But Litchfield's heart is in the right place. His efforts are for the safety and well-being of the town.

Sue Butler

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